JB Pritzker
Governor

DCFS
Illinois Department of
Children and Family Services

Heidi E. Mueller
Director

Dear Illinois Educators,

On behalf of Illinois DCFS and the Illinois State Board of Education, we want to thank you for the essential role you play in the lives of hundreds of thousands of children and families across Illinois. School personnel are among the most important mandated reporters in our state, and your partnership helps ensure that children who may be experiencing abuse or neglect come to our attention quickly and their families receive the support they need to keep them safe.

As the new school year begins, we want to update you on our efforts to improve and transform child welfare practice in Illinois through stronger engagement, prevention and early intervention: continued implementation of the Safety Assessment Family Evaluation (SAFE) Model, the launch of our Forward Together initiative, and the introduction of our fully redesigned Mandated Reporter training.

We are extremely proud to share with you an important Department-wide shift to improve the quality and consistency of our decision-making and our effectiveness in engaging with families with the launch of our Forward Together initiative on July 1.

The Forward Together initiative includes implementing the Safety Assessment and Family Evaluation (SAFE) Model, which is an evidence-based, holistic and collaborative child protection decision making approach. The SAFE Model is a framework that helps guide how we assess safety and make decisions about next steps. It replaces an older tool that relied heavily on checklists and could lead to inconsistent decisions, and:

- Focuses on understanding what is happening within a family, not just what is reported.
- Helps staff identify immediate and potential safety concerns.
- Supports consistent, thoughtful decision-making.
- Centers both child safety and family strengths.

Now, when a hotline report meets criteria to be assigned to a DCFS child protection specialist, that specialist will begin by meeting with the family and conducting a Family Functioning Assessment within 14 days. The Family Functioning Assessment is a comprehensive, holistic information-gathering and family assessment process that allows child protection specialists to assess child safety, understand family circumstances more fully, and determine whether the situation requires a formal investigation or another child protection response, such as linkage to resources like housing assistance, medical care or childcare.

The Family Functioning Assessment allows for stronger, more effective engagement with families, more comprehensive information gathering, and more accurate safety decisions while reducing unnecessary trauma for children and families and ensuring they are connected to the support they need.

This change is important because we know that when we effectively engage and support families early on, children and youth are safer and better off. We have also learned that many families who come to our attention may be experiencing significant stress and/or hardship and need support, and not all are situations of abuse or neglect. That is why DCFS has also created a new arm of the Department focusing on prevention services to support families before becoming involved in the child welfare system.

This more holistic, family-focused approach means that some of the questions you will be asked when you make a report of suspected child abuse or neglect have changed. As a reminder, these new questions focus on five areas:

- Extent and surrounding circumstances of alleged child abuse and neglect: What is the abuse/neglect concern? Who did what to whom? Is the child currently safe/unsafe? Are there safety concerns if a DCFS worker goes to the family's home?
- Child functioning: Information about the child's health, behavior, emotions, development, strengths or developmental delays.
- Adult functioning: Caregiver strengths, health, behavior, cognitive functioning, substance abuse issues, domestic violence concerns or mental health concerns.
- Parenting and discipline practices: Caregiver parenting practices, discipline practices, parent/child relationship.
- Military: Caregiver's military involvement and branch of service.

Asking these more in-depth questions will help us learn much more about the family at the onset; allowing our DCFS Hotline staff and child protection specialists to make more informed decisions when screening intakes and visiting homes; and ultimately leading to stronger families and more timely permanency for our youth.

With the statewide implementation of the SAFE Model and the launch of Forward Together, there are several key pieces of information that are important for educators to know:

- Your role as a mandated reporter remains critical in keeping children safe. Your legal obligations as a mandated reporter will not change and if you have reasonable cause to believe that a child known to you may be abused or neglected, you must continue to make a report to the DCFS Hotline. In a non-emergency situation, visit our Online Reporting System at childabuse.illinois.gov. In an emergency, call the Illinois DCFS Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline at 1-800-25-ABUSE (800-252-2873). Calls and online reports may be made 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- DCFS will continue to respond when children may be unsafe. The Family Functioning Assessment will help our child protection specialists determine whether a formal investigation is warranted or whether a family needs supportive prevention or early intervention services. If the information gathered during the Family Functioning Assessment supports a formal investigation, that investigation will proceed according to DCFS protocol.
- School personnel remain essential partners in understanding a child's well-being. Observations related to behavior, attendance, disclosures and functioning continue to play a vital role in our assessment of safety. DCFS will continue to rely on you to play a critical role in identifying children and families in need of DCFS intervention and support.

To help you and other mandated reporters understand your vital role in protecting children, the Illinois Mandated Reporter Training has been fully redesigned to better reflect our DCFS mission: promoting the well-being of children, youth, and families by responding to reports of potential abuse and neglect and, when needed providing family-centered care and connection to resources. This new version goes beyond recognizing and reporting suspected abuse and neglect. It equips learners with tools to understand when a family needs support, not a report.

What's new in the training?

- Guidance to help distinguish poverty from neglect.
- A focus on supporting families through early connections to services.
- Strategies for recognizing and addressing implicit bias.

- A trauma-informed approach to interacting with children and families.
- Clear, practical information about how and when to make a report.

Our goal is to ensure children and families receive the right response, at the right time, while maintaining strong partnerships with educators across Illinois. We cannot emphasize enough how much we value your partnership in ensuring Illinois children are safe and their families are supported.

Thank you for all you do to support the safety and welfare of young people in Illinois.

Heidi E. Mueller
Director
Illinois Department of Children and Family Services

Dr. Tony Sanders
State Superintendent of Education
Illinois State Board of Education